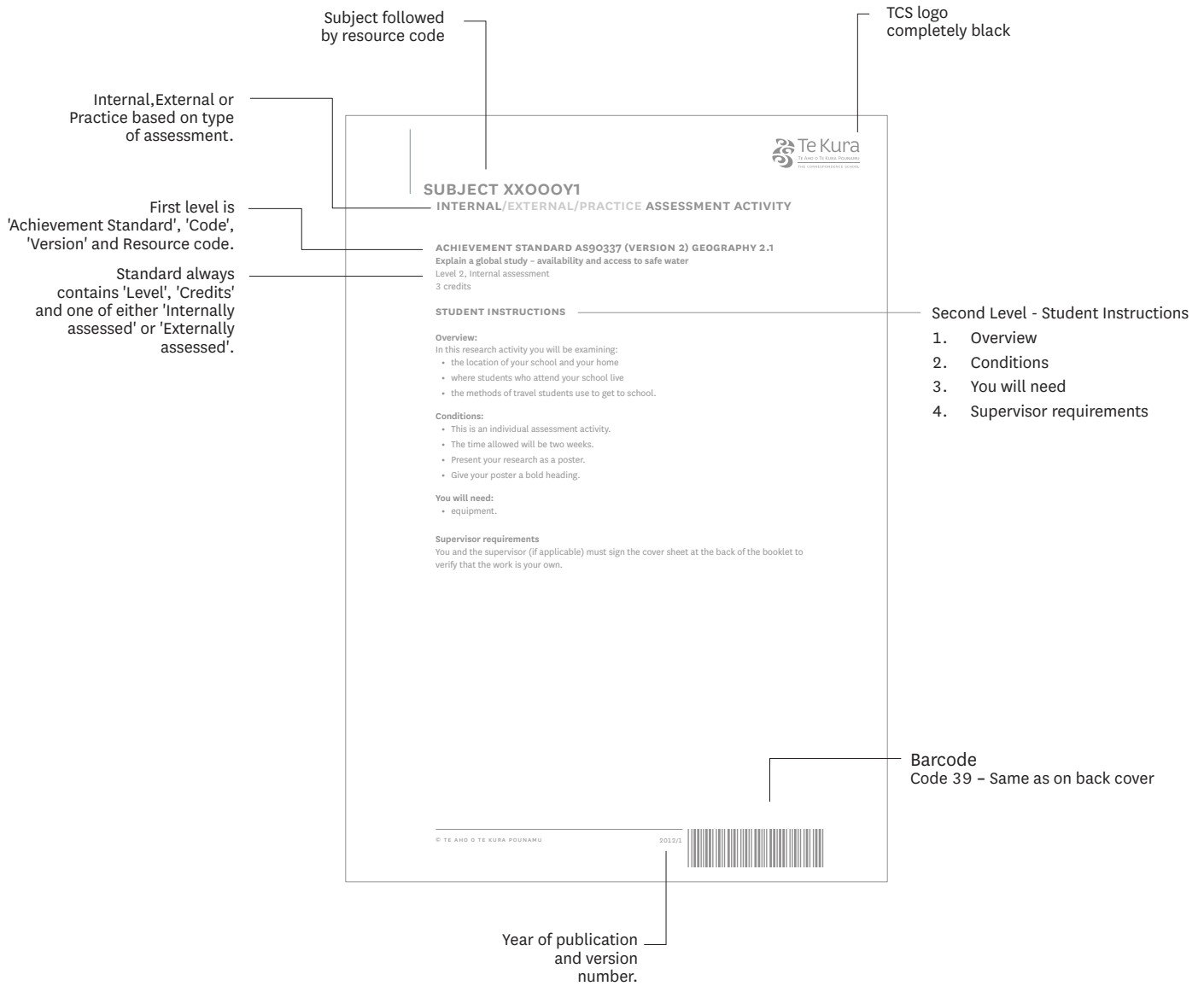


ART HISTORY AH38Y1A
STUDENT RESOURCE (A)





Comments

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ART HISTORY AH38Y1A

STUDENT RESOURCE (A)

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1. *The Art of the Renaissance*, Paoletti and Radke, Laurence King Publishing, 2005. pp 371–372
2. *Leonardo da Vinci*, Kenneth Clark, Penguin books, 1989, pp 144–154
3. *Leonardo da Vinci: the myth and the man*, Frances Stonor Saunders, Article: The Guardian, 21 October 2011 www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/2011/oct/21/leonardo-da-vinci-painter-milan?INTCMP=SRCH
4. *Lives of the Artists*, Vasari, Internet Medieval Source book, extracts www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/vasari1.html
5. *Leonardo*, Martin Kemp, Oxford University Press, 2011, extracts from pp 183–201
6. *The Da Vinci Code*, Dan Brown, Corgi, 2004, pp 326–336

It is strongly recommended that you have an image of the *Last Supper* in front of you when you read the extracts.

Sketches referred to in some extracts can be seen at:
www.davincisketches.com/Human/Studies1.htm

***The Art of the Renaissance*, Paoletti and Radke, Laurence King Publishing, 2005. Third edition, first published 1997. pp 371–372**



Leonardo da Vinci

The Last Supper

The Sforzas also commissioned artists to enhance the living quarters of the Dominicans at Santa Maria delle Grazie. For the refectory they commissioned a fresco of *The Last Supper* from Leonardo da Vinci. Ludovico's and Beatrice's names and coats of arms appear proudly in the central lunette over the composition; to either side are the emblems of their sons and successors, Massimiliano (reigned 1512–15) and Francesco II (r. 1521–24, 1529–35), yet another dynastic image.

Leonardo had been in Milan since 1481 or 1482 when he wrote a letter to Ludovico offering his services as a military and city planner, sculptor, and sometime painter, an indication that whereas we now esteem Leonardo mainly for his surviving paintings and drawings, he gauged that his skills in engineering were more likely to be appreciated by a potential patron.

The subject of the Last Supper was traditional for refectories but Leonardo invested it with a new sense of drama, which has made it none of the most memorable images in Western art. Selecting the moment just after Christ announces that one of his disciples will betray him, Leonardo imagined the apostles' confusion and self-doubt, and portrayed their agitated reactions. He arranged them in four groups, linked by their gestures and turning bodies. Christ becomes the calm fulcrum in the midst of this turbulence, with all the human energy, as well as the strong diagonals of the deeply tunnelling space, resonating around his stable, pyramidal form. Casting his eyes down towards his open left hand, Christ makes a gesture of sacrifice, offering his mystical body through the symbol of a piece of bread. At the same time, he embraces his destiny, reaching out with his right hand to share a portion with Judas, whose shadowed face and body – and the fact that he is alone is not protesting – indicate his treachery. By placing Christ against a luminous landscape, Leonardo was able to dispense with a conventional halo; nature here embodies and symbioses the divine.

Leonardo's perspective system is also highly expressive. Constructed from Christ's eye level, just to the left of his head, it creates a deep and measurable space, much more capacious than earlier versions of the scene. Doorways between the tapestries on the left wall – revealed in recent restorations – and niches between the ones on the right create cross axes, extending the space beyond the perimeters of the room. And yet Leonardo has pushed the apostles' table curiously close to the picture frame, locking his figures in the embrace of the receding walls. He also extended the orthogonals along the edges of his ceiling to the, upper corners of the refectory in which the fresco is located, that is, from above and to the sides of the lunettes containing the Sforza family's coat of arms, causing the illusionistic space to tunnel much more quickly than the actual space occupied by the viewer. These devices serve to focus special attention on Christ and the apostles, causing an exalted vision of an event central to the Christian theology of redemption.

Leonardo's wall painting was like none that ever had been seen before. Novel in its composition and emotional tenor, it was also produced in an experimental technique, largely applied a *secco* using a mixture of tempera and oil, allowing Leonardo time to achieve effects similar to oil painting. He carefully rendered every stitch of embroidery on the tablecloth, the alternately convex and concave depressions of its crisply pressed folds, the glint of light on the wine glasses,

the dull sheen of the ceramic bowls, and the crusty goodness of the bread. But for the most part Leonardo's pigments did not adhere to the wall, causing the surface to deteriorate soon after it was completed. A doorway later punched into the centre of the base literally added insult to injury. Modern conservation has been able to do little more than consolidate spotty patches of pigment. Had it not been for the strength of the overall composition and for copies the work immediately inspired, it would be impossible to imagine the impact it once made, however briefly.

The authors

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Leonardo da Vinci, Kenneth Clark, Penguin books, 1989, pp 144–154

First published 1939, revised 1959, 1967, revised with introduction by Martin Kemp 1988.

We have now reached what is commonly held to be the climax of Leonardo's career as painter, the *Last Supper*. It is a point at which the student of Leonardo must hesitate, appalled at the quantity of writing which this masterpiece has already evoked, and at the unquestionable authority of the masterpiece itself. And almost more numbing than this authority is its familiarity. How can we criticise a work that we have all known from childhood? We have come to regard Leonardo's *Last Supper* more of a work of nature than a work of man, and we no more think of questioning its shape than we should question the shape of the British Isles on a map. Before such a picture the difficulty is not so much to analyse our feelings as to have any feelings at all. But there are alternatives to the direct aesthetic approach. We may profitably imagine the day when the *Last Supper* did not exist, and Leonardo was faced with a blank wall and an exacting patron.

The *Last Supper* was painted at the command of Ludovico il Moro for the refectory of the convent of Dominican friars at Santa Maria delle Grazie, Milan. It was probably begun in 1495, but the archives of the convent have been destroyed and our meagre documents date from 1497 when the painting was nearly finished. On 29 June in that year the Duke sent a memorandum ordering Leonardo the Florentine to finish the work begun in the refectory of the Grazie and then to see to the other end wall of the refectory. This implies that the *Last Supper* was far advanced.... we have several accounts of the work by eye-witnesses, including one by the novelist, Bandello.

Many a time I have seen Leonardo go early in the morning to work on the platform before the Last Supper, and there he would stay from sunrise till darkness, never laying down the brush, but continuing to paint without eating or drinking. Then three or four days would pass without his touching the work, yet each day he would spend several hours examining it and criticising the figures to himself. I have also seen him ... take a brush and give a few touches to one of the figures: and then suddenly he would leave and go elsewhere.

Such irregular methods meant that the painting could not be al fresco, and in fact, we know that Leonardo used a medium containing oil and varnish. The wall was damp and as a result the painting soon began to suffer. ... it is hard to resist the conclusion that what we see now on the wall of the Grazie is largely the work of restorers. ...Concrete evidence of restoration is provided by a comparison of the Apostle's heads in the fresco with those in early copies. Perhaps the best examples are the two independent series of drawings at Weimar and Strasbourg, which were done direct from the original by Leonardo's pupils and show none of the personal variations which occur in a painted copy. Now these drawings agree in certain differences from the painting as we now have it, and in each case the drawing is clearly superior both in sentiment and design. Take four of the Apostles on the left of Christ. In the original, St Peter, with his villainously low forehead, is one of the most disturbing figures in the whole composition; but the copies show that his head was originally tilted back in foreshortening. The restorer was unable to follow this difficult piece of drawing and has rendered it as a deformity. He shows a similar failure to cope with an unusual pose in the heads of Judas and St Andrew. The copies show that Judas was originally in profile, a fact confirmed by Leonardo's drawings at Windsor. The restorer has turned him around into pure profile, with considerable damage to his sinister effect. St Andrew was almost in profile; the restorer has turned him into the conventional three-quarters. He has also made the old man into an appalling type of simian hypocrisy. The head of St James the Less is entirely the restorer's invention, and gives the measure of his ineptitude.

It is worth insisting on these changes because they prove that the dramatic effect of the *Last Supper* must depend entirely on the disposition and general movement of the figures, and not on the expression of the heads. There can be no doubt that the details of the fresco are almost entirely the work of a succession of restorers, and the exaggerated grimacing types, with their flavour of Michelangelo's *Last Judgement*, suggest that the leading hand was that of a feeble mannerist of the sixteenth century.

But in spite of the depressing insistence of these facts, some magic of the original remains, and gives the tragic ruin in Santa Maria delle Grazie a quality lacking in the smooth dark copies of Leonardo's pupils. Luminosity, the feeling for atmosphere, which distinguishes all Leonardo's genuine work from that of his pupils, must have distinguished the *Last Supper* also: and the fresco, perhaps from its very vagueness, has kept a certain atmospheric quality. As we look at them, these ghostly shadows on the wall gradually gain a power over us not solely due to the sentiment of association. Through the mists of repaint and decay we still catch sight of the superhuman forms of the original; and from the drama of their interplay we can appreciate some of the qualities which made the *Last Supper* the keystone of European art. We can recognise Leonardo's power of invention by the simple means of comparing his treatment of the subject with any other which had preceded it. The Last Suppers of Ghirlandaio and Perugino, painted only a year or two earlier, show fundamentally the same composition as that which had satisfied the faithful for almost a thousand years. Eleven apostles sit on the far side of the table, each one quiet and separate. Sometimes they talk to each other, or drink their wine. Our Lord sits in the middle with St John reclining uncomfortably on his lap. Alone, on the near side, is Judas. We have seen how Leonardo's departure from the traditional iconography of the *Adoration* involved a change in the whole interpretation of the drama. The same is true of the *Last Supper*. The older painters had represented the moment of communion, a moment of calm in which each apostle might wish to sit alone with his thoughts. Leonardo, it is well known, chose the terrible moment in which Jesus says, 'One of you will betray me.' Immediately this row of quiet individuals is unified by emotion.

Unity and drama, these are the essential qualities by which Leonardo's *Last Supper* is distinguished from earlier representation of the subject. It is worth analysing the means by which these qualities have been achieved. To begin with the setting: we notice that there is nothing to distract the eye from the main theme. 'In history painting,' says Leonardo in the *Trattato* (para 178), 'do not ever make so many ornaments on your figures or their setting as will confuse the form and attitudes of the figures or the essential character of the setting.' ... the scene of Leonardo's *Last Supper* is so bare and severe that most copyists felt bound to invent a more attractive setting. The vanishing point of the perspective is the principal figure. Every form and every gesture is concentrated. The problem of dramatic and formal concentration, always difficult, is almost insoluble when the subject is thirteen men sitting at a table. The earlier painters did not attempt to subordinate their figures to a single motif, but relied on a purely decorative arrangement. The painters of the Baroque, to whom unity of composition was essential, solved the problem by ingenious tricks of lighting and foreshortening, but in doing so they sacrificed the quietness and clarity of statement suitable to the subject, sometimes turning it into a scene of violence and confusion in which the Apostles reel and struggle among the servants and unknown onlookers. Leonardo's solution is in some respects the same as that used in the *Adoration of the Magi*, two dynamic masses united and kept in repose by a single point of balance. This seemingly simple arrangement involved the feat of composing the twelve Apostles into two groups of six: which groups should be perfectly coherent, and yet have sufficient movement to give them an interesting relation to the centre.

... unfortunately the drawings and studies in which the great construction gradually took its inevitable shape are almost entirely lost. It is perhaps a criticism of the *Last Supper* that in the groups of apostles the evidence of this labour is still too apparent. We can see how Leonardo has varied each action, calculated each interval, balanced every change in direction. He has given us the ideal demonstration of his treatise on painting. What could be more in keeping with his theories than the two groups on either side of Christ, turned inwards so that their axes form a kind of echelon of perspective around the central figure: or the way in which, having made the three apostles on the extreme left look eagerly inward, he makes two on the right look outward, but point inward, so that their intention, meeting the formidable glare of St Simon, seems to ricochet back along the line of their hands? The building up of such sequences is, no doubt, one of the greatest manifestations of intellectual power in art, but, seen through the medium of copies it remains an intellectual achievement, stupendous, but cold and academic. The centre of the composition upon which these two masses rest, the figure of Christ, springs from a deeper source. It is the unfathomable mystery of Leonardo that with all his apparent coldness, his aloofness from ordinary human feelings, his essential strangeness, he could yet create this figure so simple, so touching, and so universal in its appeal.

Evidently one cannot look for long at the *Last Supper* without ceasing to study it as a composition, and beginning to speak of it as a drama. It is the most literary of all great pictures, one of the few of which the effect may be largely conveyed – can even be enhanced – by description. It is the opposite of a picture by one of the great decorative artists, Veronese for example, where the actions, distractions, costumes and expressions of the actors may be quite unsuitable to the subject and simply chosen for their pictorial effectiveness.

I need hardly describe, what has been describe so often, the variety of gesture which Leonardo has given to the disciples, and the way in which the effect of these gestures is enhanced by contrast; how, for example, the rough impetuous Peter, pugnaciously eager to declare his innocence, contrasts with the resigned St John, content to sit quietly, because he knows that no one will suspect him, and how St Peter's hand, forming a bridge between the heads of St John and Judas, underlines the contrast between innocence and villainy. ... Very often in reading the description of a picture by a man of letters we feel that what the writer takes to be a stroke of dramatic genius is an accident of which the painter was quite unaware. With Leonardo this is not the case. We know from his notebooks and his theoretical writings on art how much thought he gave to the literary presentation of his subject. He is continually advising the painter to study expressive gestures and suitable actions, and to combine them with effects of variety and contrast: 'That figure is most praiseworthy which by its action, best expresses the passions of the soul.' With unusual good fortune we have in one of his pocket-books a note of the gestures suitable to the *Last Supper*:

'One who was drinking has left his glass in its place and turned his head towards the speaker... Another with hands spread open to show the palms shrugs his shoulders up to his ears and makes a grimace of astonishment. Another speaks into his neighbour's ear and the listener turns to lend him an ear, while he holds a knife in one hand and in the other a loaf cut through by the knife; and in turning around another, who holds a knife, upsets with his hand a glass on the table.'

There is no difficulty in recognising in St Andrew the man who shrugs his shoulders and makes the grimace of astonishment; and St Peter, who speaks into his neighbour's ear, still holds the knife. ... as the conception of the *Last Supper* became more heroic, everyday gestures became

too trivial. The man who upsets a glass has suffered a curious transformation. The motif has been given to Judas, only instead of a knife he holds the bag, and instead of a glass he upsets the salt, an accident still commemorated by the superstitious.

... In the *Last Supper* the movement is frozen. There is something rather terrifying about all these ponderous figures in action; something of a contradiction in terms in the slow labour which has gone to the perfection of every gesture. And beyond this is a deeper cause. The whole force of gesture, as an expression of emotion, lies in its spontaneity: and the gestures in the *Last Supper* are not spontaneous. Leonardo, as we have just seen, consciously excluded those motions which approached the nature of genre (everyday actions). He intended the whole scene to be carried through in the highest mood of classical art, and this imposition of classicism on his innate feeling for life is slightly disturbing. The apostles are too vital to be heroic, too large to be so animated.

And here we come back to the disastrous change which the whole picture has suffered from the repainting of the heads; for had the original heads been there, with all their pathos and dramatic intensity, the gestures, in a subsidiary role, might have lost some of their flavour of artifice. The coarsely painted grimaces which are all that time and restoration have left us, would have horrified Leonardo, for many passages in the *Trattato* show us the importance he gave to facial expression and describe how the painter must use every artifice to observe it and note it down. To gain any idea of what we have lost we must turn to the few surviving drawings, in particular those two masterpieces, *St James the Greater* and *St Philip* at Windsor and we must remember that in the painting the dramatic intensity of both heads would certainly have been increased; they would have ceased to be studies from life and have become embodiments of emotional states, as concentrated and complete as the highest creations of classic drama.

The author

Kenneth Clark was the Director of the National Gallery in London during the 1930s. He had a distinguished career in the arts and in broadcasting.

Leonardo, Martin Kemp, Oxford University Press, 2011. First published 2004. Extracts from pp 183–201

Actors and Popes

The spaces are of course not the be-all and end-all of the pictures. Perspective provided only the opening of the three books in Alberti's *De pictura*. The end in view, as Leonardo would have agreed, was the *historia*, what Leonardo termed the 'fiction that signifies great things.' After the conceptual and graphic brain-storming, and the mapping of the space, the figures required further study. As yet, they were little more than energetic scribbles. Sometimes, as for the *Adoration (of the Magi)*, he made sketches of pairs or groups of figures in interaction, perhaps studied from life in the public baths, as he recommended. But the crucial step was the drawing of posed figures from life, generally in the studio. The youths in the *bottega* might stand in for biblical figures or secular heroes. Or characters with the required features (sometimes with extraordinary faces) might be pressed into service. In a typical note, he recorded that he has found a model for a detail in his *Last Supper*: 'Alessandro Carissimo of Parma for the hand of Christ.'

As it happens we have surprisingly few posed studies from life for whole figures. Far more of Michelangelo's and Raphael's survive. It may be that Leonardo's greatest effort, once he had conceived a pose, went into the heads, hands and draperies, which were the parts that would be seen, head studies were his particular forte.

If we set the wonderfully sensitive red chalk drawing in Windsor of the *Head of St James the Greater* (www.davincisketches.com/Human/Studies1.htm) for the *Last Supper* beside that of a shrieking warrior in Budapest for the *Battle of Anghiari*, we can gain a vivid idea of how dramatically Leonardo can convey the *concetto dell'anima* of men of utterly different character in situations of extremis. St James, full of youthful nervous sensibility, starts back, withdrawing his shoulders and neck at the same time as inclining his head forward to register that the shocking words have indeed been said. His eyes are dark with fear and his mouth open in shocked disbelief. The warrior was drawn some six or more years later for the doomed battle scene on the wall of the Council Hall of the Florentine Republic.

His face is contorted with rage, his brow gathered into deep furrows and his gap-toothed mouth torn open to its maximum extension. On one of his preliminary studies for the battle Leonardo had depicted heads of a horse, a man, and a lion emitting similar cries of rage through wide-open mouths. The characterisation of the warrior conforms to Leonardo's prescriptions for a bestial and wrathful man: 'those who have facial features of great relief and depth are bestial and wrathful men of little reason, and those who have strongly pronounced lines between their eyebrows are evidently wrathful.'

In their respective paintings, the head of St James and the warrior were of course surrounded by types more closely like themselves, but the individuality to which Leonardo aspired could readily differentiate between the youthful saint and the guilty Judas.

Hands were also prime subjects of attention, since they speak with an eloquence little less than that of the face. He was intrigued by how the dumb communicate without words:

The good painter has to paint two principal things, that is to say man and the intention of his mind. The first is easy and the second is difficult, because the latter has to be represented through gestures and movements of his limbs – which can be learned from the dumb, who exhibit gestures better than any other kind of man ... Do not laugh at me because I propose an instructor without speech, who is to teach you an art of which he is unaware, because he will teach you better through what he actually does than others can through their words.

When he writes about painting a *Last Supper*, he details a series of hand and arm gestures: ‘One who was drinking has left his glass in its place and turned his head towards the speaker. Another wrings the fingers of his hands and turns with a frown to his companion. Another with hands spread open to show the palms shrugs his shoulders up to his ears and mouths astonishment.’ In the Royal Collection at Windsor, eloquent hand studies survive for the *Last Supper* and there is a terrific sheet of disembodied hands for the *Adoration* at Windsor, which conveys their owners’ reactions as surely as any words – or so Leonardo would have us believe.

The other expressive dimension to be utilised to the full was the figure’s draperies. They served a range of functions that tend to elude us today. Their basic nature – their style, their social or ethnic type, their functionality, the quality of the cloth, the fineness of the cut, their luxuriousness or reticence, their historical or contemporary mien and their modesty of suggestiveness – spoke volumes about their wearers’ qualities. Additionally, they were expressive of the body beneath, particularly when the opportunity presented itself to imitate the ‘wet-style’ drapery favoured by ancient sculptors. Even with more heavy cloths, the thrust of a knee could say so much about a figure’s deportment. Not least, draperies were a key signifier of motion. A fluttering twist of cloth behind a running woman would leave nobody in any doubt about the pace of her flight.

Every component in every painting must be studied with equal meticulousness, first with reverence towards its own special visual qualities but also so that it might be an active and integrated contributor to the whole sense and meaning of a scene. The restoration of the *Last Supper* has disclosed how little of Leonardo remains, but it has also shown the astonishing quality of what has. For instance, the freshly washed and ironed tablecloth is portrayed with immaculate care. Its reticently beautiful blue embroidery is described with delight, as are the concave and convex creases that have results from folding and pressing while it was still somewhat damp. The vessels on the table sit discreetly and succinctly in space, eloquently foreshortened, with their essential shapes and sheens described with all the economy of a Zurbaran or Chardin.

Viewing in Public

Scale and setting were all important in the act of viewing. The setting of the *Last Supper* in the refectory of Sta Maria delle Grazie in Milan might, on the surface, seem to provide a straightforward audience for the mural. It was, as was common in Tuscan refectories, to act as a daily reminder for the monks of the Eucharistic significance of Christ’s last documented meal before his sacrifice. As the monks broke their bread and drank their wine, Christ and the disciples were engaged portentously in the same activity. There is no doubt that the cunning illusionism and overt naturalism of Leonardo’s mural in its original state served this function brilliantly, not least through its wonderful still-life passages of the loaves and wine glasses. But it was clear that the prior of this monastery was not the person to whom Leonardo was primarily accountable. The correspondence makes it clear that it was Ludovico Sforza’s commission. He was in the process

of totally reshaping the church and its buildings, which lay a little distance from his castle. Bramante was constructing a vast new east end as a great centralised structure of the type he was to develop for St Peter's in Rome. It was intended to serve as the setting for the Sforza mausoleums. New courtyards were constructed in the latest Renaissance style. The complex of buildings was to be a showcase for the Sforza.

We also know that its actual audience involved what we would call members of the public. We do not know 'the terms of admission' in the years immediately after its completion, but it is clear that it created a sensation, not least amongst artists, and it was widely and immediately copied on a variety of scales, up to life-size, including wall paintings in Lombardy and full-scale copies in oils on canvas, the best of which is now in the Chapel of Magdalen College, Oxford. At least one early engraving was made, and its essentials were rapidly transmitted to Florence and other ambitious centres of Renaissance art. Important and alert visitors to Milan went to see it, including the king of France and his retinue. All the early testimonies confirm that it seemed to be as much a work of nature as of art, not least to viewers unaccustomed to the latest techniques being forged by the Tuscan masters.

In fact the *Last Supper* in its actual setting made quite strenuous demands on the viewer's suspension of disbelief. The high viewpoint requires the spectator's collaboration in the necessary artifice, as was relatively standard in narratives set fairly high on walls. We are asked to let the plunging space work without remarking that it stands in a one-to-one relationship with the architecture that surrounds it. Leonardo does not expect us to ask how the clusters of agitated disciples could ever have once been seated in a comfortable row behind the table. Once we collaborate in the required way, the great deliberation the Leonardo put into making it convincing can have its effect. He tells us in every detail how the light enters the room from the windows on the left of the real one. He leads us into the calm centre, with Christ's emphatic movements towards the bread and wine, through the speaking lips and hands of the disciples into their inner turmoil. Christ's fateful words strike each listener with a sharp 'percussion', and the resulting sound of that percussion is dependent on the vessel in which it resonates. Contemporary viewers, more aware than most of us of the character and traditional characterisation of the disciples, would have been better able to make full sense of the individual reactions than we are able to do. And an Italian audience is still better placed to read the gestures than a visiting Anglo-Saxon. Above all, it fulfils all the demands that Alberti placed on a *historia* and that Leonardo placed on narratives of the greatest subject known to man.

The author

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*Giorgio Vasari (1511–1574) wrote about hundreds of artists in his **Lives of the Most Eminent Italian Architects, Painters, and Sculptors**, which he published first in 1550, and in a revised edition in 1568.*

LIFE OF LEONARDO DA VINCI: Painter and Sculptor of Florence

The greatest gifts are often seen, in the course of nature, rained by celestial influences on human creatures; and sometimes, in supernatural fashion, beauty, grace, and talent are united beyond measure in one single person, in a manner that to whatever such an one turns his attention, his every action is so divine, that, surpassing all other men, it makes itself clearly known as a thing bestowed by God (as it is), and not acquired by human art. This was seen by all mankind in Leonardo da Vinci, in whom, besides a beauty of body never sufficiently extolled, there was an infinite grace in all his actions; and so great was his genius, and such its growth, that to whatever difficulties he turned his mind, he solved them with ease. In him was great bodily strength, joined to dexterity, with a spirit and courage ever royal and magnanimous; and the fame of his name so increased, that not only in his lifetime was he held in esteem, but his reputation became even greater among posterity after his death.

Truly marvellous and celestial was Leonardo, the son of Ser Piero da Vinci; and in learning and in the rudiments of letters he would have made great proficiencie, if he had not been so variable and unstable, for he set himself to learn many things, and then, after having begun them, abandoned them. Thus, in arithmetic, during the few months that he studied it, he made so much progress, that, by continually suggesting doubts and difficulties to the master who was teaching him, he would very often bewilder him. He gave some little attention to music, and quickly resolved to learn to play the lyre, as one who had by nature a spirit most lofty and full of refinement: wherefore he sang divinely to that instrument, improvising upon it. Nevertheless, although he occupied himself with such a variety of things, he never ceased drawing and working in relief, pursuits which suited his fancy more than any other. Ser Piero, having observed this, and having considered the loftiness of his intellect, one day took some of his drawings and carried them to Andrea del Verrocchio, who was much his friend, and besought him straitly [sic] to tell him whether Leonardo, by devoting himself to drawing, would make any proficiencie. Andrea was astonished to see the extraordinary beginnings of Leonardo, and urged Ser Piero that he should make him study it; wherefore he arranged with Leonardo that he should enter the workshop of Andrea, which Leonardo did with the greatest willingness in the world. And he practised not one branch of art only, but all those in which drawing played a part; and having an intellect so divine and marvellous that he was also an excellent geometrician, he not only worked in sculpture, making in his youth, in clay, some heads of women that are smiling, of which plaster casts are still taken, and likewise some heads of boys which appeared to have issued from the hand of a master; but in architecture, also, he made many drawings both of ground-plans and of other designs of buildings; and he was the first, although but a youth, who suggested the plan of reducing the river Arno to a navigable canal from Pisa to Florence. He made designs of flour-mills, fullingmills, and engines, which might be driven by the force of water; and since he wished that his profession should be painting, he studied much in drawing after nature, and sometimes in making models of figures in clay, over which he would lay soft pieces of cloth dipped in clay, and then set himself patiently to draw them on a certain kind of very fine Rheims cloth, or prepared linen; and he executed them in black and white with the point of his brush, so that it was a marvel, as some of them by his hand, which I have in our book of drawings, still bear witness; besides which, he drew on paper with such diligence and so well, that there is no one who has ever equalled him in perfection of finish; and I have one, a head drawn with the style in chiaroscuro, which is divine.

And there was infused in that brain such grace from God, and a power of expression in such sublime accord with the intellect and memory that served it, and he knew so well how to express his conceptions by draughtmanship, that he vanquished with his discourse, and confuted with his reasoning, every valiant wit. And he was continually making models and designs to show men how to remove mountains with ease, and how to bore them in order to pass from one level to another; and by means of levers, windlasses, and screws, he showed the way to raise and draw great weights, together with methods for emptying harbours, and pumps for removing water from low places, things which his brain never ceased from devising.

It is clear that Leonardo, through his comprehension of art, began many things and never finished one of them, since it seemed to him that the hand was not able to attain to the perfection of art in carrying out the things which he imagined; for the reason that he conceived in idea difficulties so subtle and so marvellous, that they could never be expressed by the hands, be they ever so excellent. And so many were his caprices, that, philosophising of natural things, he set himself to seek out the properties of herbs, going on even to observe the motions of the heavens, the path of the moon, and the courses of the sun.

He also painted in Milan, for the Friars of S. Dominic, at S. Maria dell Grazie, a *Last Supper*, a most beautiful and marvellous thing; and to the heads of the apostles he gave such majesty and beauty, that he left the head of Christ unfinished, not believing that he was able to give it that divine air which is essential to the image of Christ. This work, remaining thus all but finished, has ever been held by the Milanese in the greatest veneration, and also by strangers as well; for Leonardo imagined and succeeded in expressing that anxiety which had seized the Apostles in wishing to know who should betray their Master. For which reason in all their faces are seen love, fear, and wrath, or rather, sorrow, at not being able to understand the meaning of Christ; which thing excites no less marvel than the sight, in contrast to it, of obstinacy, hatred, and treachery in Judas; not to mention that every least part of the work displays an incredible diligence, seeing that even in the tablecloth the texture of the stuff is counterfeited in such a manner that linen itself could not seem more real.

It is said that the Prior of that place kept pressing Leonardo, in a most importunate manner, to finish the work; for it seemed strange to him to see Leonardo sometimes stand half a day at a time, lost in contemplation, and he would have like him to go on like the labourers hoeing in his garden, without ever stopping his brush. And not content with this, he complained of it to the Duke, and that so warmly, that he was constrained to send for Leonardo and delicately urged him to work, contriving nevertheless to show him that he was doing all this because of the importunity of the Prior. Leonardo, knowing that the intellect of that Prince was acute and discerning, was pleased to discourse at large with the Duke on the subject, a thing which he had never done with the Prior: and he reasoned much with him about art, and made him understand that men of lofty genius sometimes accomplish the most when they work the least, seeking out inventions with the mind, and forming those perfect ideas which the hands afterwards express and reproduce from the images already conceived in the brain. And he added that two heads were still wanting for him to paint; that of Christ, which he did not wish to seek on earth; and he could not think that it was possible to conceive in the imagination that beauty and heavenly grace which should be the mark of God incarnate. Next, there was wanting that of Judas, which was also troubling him, not thinking himself capable of imagining features that should represent

the countenance of him who, after so many benefits received, had a mind so cruel as to resolve to betray his Lord, the Creator of the world. However, he would seek out a model for the latter; but if in the end he could not find a better, he should not want that of the importunate and tactless Prior. This thing moved the Duke wondrously to laughter, and he said that Leonardo had a thousand reasons on his side. And so the poor Prior, in confusion, confined himself to urging on the work in the garden, and left Leonardo in peace, who finished only the head of Judas, which seems the very embodiment of treachery and inhumanity; but that of Christ, as has been said, remained unfinished.

Leonardo undertook to execute, for Francesco del Giocondo, the portrait of Mona Lisa, his wife; and after toiling over it for four years, he left it unfinished; and the work is now in the collection of King Frances of France, at Fontainebleau. In this head, whoever wished to see how closely art could imitate nature, was able to comprehend it with ease; for in it were counterfeited all the minutenesses that with subtlety are able to be painted, seeing that the eyes had that lustre and watery sheen which are always seen in life, and around them were all those rosy and pearly tints, as well as the lashes, which cannot be represented without the greatest subtlety. The eyebrows, through his having shown the manner in which the hairs spring from the flesh, here more close and here more scanty, and curve according to the pores of the skin, could not be more natural. The nose, with its beautiful nostrils, rosy and tender, appeared to be alive. The mouth, with its opening, and with its ends united by the red of the lips to the flesh-tints of the face, seemed, in truth, to be not colours but flesh. In the pit of the throat, if one gazed upon it intently, could be seen the beating of the pulse. And, indeed, it may be said that it was painted in such a manner as to make every valiant craftsman, be he who he may, tremble and lose heart. He made use, also, of this device: Mona Lisa being very beautiful, he always employed, while he was painting her portrait, persons to play or sing, and jesters, who might make her remain merry, in order to take away that melancholy which painters are often wont to give to the portraits that they paint. And in this work of Leonardo's there was a smile so pleasing, that it was a thing more divine than human to behold; and it was held to be something marvellous, since the reality was not more alive

There was very great disdain between Michelangelo Buonarroti and him, on account of which Michelangelo departed from Florence, with the excuse of Duke Giuliano, having been summoned by the Pope to the competition for the facade of S. Lorenzo. Leonardo, understanding this, departed and went into France, where the King, having had works by his hand, bore him great affection; and he desired that he should colour the cartoon of S. Anne, but Leonardo, according to his custom, put him off for a long time with words.

Finally, having grown old, he remained ill many months, and, feeling himself near to death, asked to have himself diligently informed of the teaching of the Catholic faith, and of the good way and holy Christian religion; and then, with many moans, he confessed and was penitent; and although he could not raise himself well on his feet, supporting himself on the arms of his friends and servants, he was pleased to take devoutly the most holy Sacrament, out of his bed. The King, who was wont often and lovingly to visit him, then came into the room; wherefore he, out of reverence, having raised himself to sit upon the bed, giving him an account of his sickness and the circumstances of it, showed withal how much he had offended God and mankind in not having worked at his art as he should have done. Thereupon he was seized by a paroxysm, the

messenger of death; for which reason the King having risen and having taken his head, in order to assist him and show him favour, to then end that he might alleviate his pain, his spirit, which was divine, knowing that it could not have any greater honour, expired in the arms of the King, in the seventy fifth year of his age.

From Giorgio Vasari: “Life of Leonardo da Vinci”, in *Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*, translated by Gaston DeC. De Vere, (London: Philip Lee Warner, 1912–1914), pp 89–92, 95–101, 104–105

***The Da Vinci Code*, Dan Brown, Corgi, 2004, pp 318–19, 326–336**

The *Da Vinci Code* is a novel about the search in modern times for the Holy Grail.

Sophie looked again at the Da Vinci quote before her. *Blinding ignorance does mislead us. O! wretched mortals, open your eyes!*

Teabing reached for the book and flipped towards the centre. ‘And finally, before I show you Da Vinci’s paintings of the Holy Grail, I’d like you to take a quick look at this.’ He opened the book to a colourful graphic that spanned both full pages. ‘I assume you recognise this fresco?’

He’s kidding, right? Sophie was staring at the most famous fresco of all time – *The Last Supper* – Da Vinci’s legendary painting on the wall of Santa Maria delle Grazie in Milan. The decaying fresco portrayed Jesus and his disciples at the moment that Jesus announced one of them would betray Him. ‘I know the fresco, yes.’

‘Then perhaps you would indulge me this little game? Close your eyes if you would.’

Uncertain, Sophie closed her eyes.

‘Where is Jesus sitting?’ Teabing asked.

‘In the centre.’

‘Good. And what food are He and His disciples breaking and eating?’

‘Bread.’ *Obviously.*

‘Superb. And what drink?’

‘Wine. They drank wine.’

‘Great. And one final question. How many wineglasses are on the table?’

Sophie paused, realising it was the trick question. *And after dinner, Jesus took the cup of wine, sharing it with his disciples.* ‘One cup,’ she said. ‘The chalice.’ *The Cup of Christ. The Holy Grail.* ‘Jesus passed a single chalice of wine, just as modern Christians do at communion.’

Teabing sighed. ‘Open your eyes.’

She did. Teabing was grinning smugly. Sophie looked down at the painting, seeing to her astonishment that everyone at the table had a glass of wine, including Christ. Thirteen cups. Moreover, the cups were tiny, stemless, and made of glass. There was no chalice in the painting. No Holy Grail.

Teabing’s eyes twinkled. ‘A bit strange, don’t you think, considering that both the Bible and our standard Grail legend celebrate this moment as the definitive arrival of the Holy Grail. Oddly, da Vinci appears to have forgotten to paint the cup of Christ.’

‘Surely art scholars must have noted that?’

‘You will be shocked to learn what anomalies Da Vinci included here that most scholars either do not see or simply choose to ignore. This fresco, in fact, is the entire key to the Holy Grail mystery. Da Vinci lays it all out in the open in *The Last Supper*.’

Sophie scanned the work eagerly. ‘Does this fresco tell us what the Grail really is?’

Not *what* it is, Teabing whispered. ‘But rather *who* it is. The Holy Grail is not a thing. It is, in fact, ... a person.’

... pg 327

‘As it turns out, the Holy Grail does indeed make an appearance in *The Last Supper*. Leonardo included her prominently.’

‘Hold on,’ Sophie said. ‘You told me the Holy Grail is a woman. *The Last Supper* is a painting of thirteen men.’

Uncertain, Sophie made her way closer to the painting, scanning the thirteen figures – Jesus Christ in the middle, six disciples on his left and six on his right.

‘They’re all men,’ she confirmed.

‘Oh?’ Teabing said. ‘How about the one seated in the place of honour, at the right hand of the Lord?’

Sophie examined the figure to Jesus’ immediate right, focusing in. as she studied the person’s face and body, a wave of astonishment rose within her. The individual had flowing red hair, delicate folded hands, and the hint of a bosom. It was, without a doubt ... female.

... Sophie could not take her eyes from the woman beside Christ. *The Last Supper is supposed to be thirteen men. Who is this woman?* Although Sophie had seen this classic image many times she had not once noticed this glaring discrepancy.

‘Everyone misses it,’ Teabing said. ‘Our preconceived notions of this scene are so powerful that our mind blocks out the incongruity and overrides our eyes.’

‘Another reason you might have missed the woman is that many of the photographs in art books were taken before 1954, when the details were still hidden beneath layers of grime and several restorative repaintings done by clumsy hands in the eighteenth century. Now, at last, the fresco has been cleaned down to Da Vinci’s original layer of paint.’ He motioned to the photograph. ‘Et voila!’

Sophie moved closer to the image. The woman to Jesus’ right was young and pious-looking, with a demure face, beautiful red hair and hands folded quietly. *This is the woman who singlehandedly could crumble the Church?*

‘Who is she?’ Sophie asked.

‘That, my dear, is Mary Magdalene.’

‘The prostitute?’

Teabing drew a short breath, as if the word had injured him personally. ‘Magdalene was no such thing. That unfortunate misconception is the legacy of a smear campaign launched by the early Church. The Church needed to defame Mary Magdalene in order to cover up her dangerous secret – her role as the Holy Grail.’

‘Her role?’

‘As I mentioned, the early Church needed to convince the world that the mortal prophet Jesus was a divine being. Therefore any gospels that described earthly aspects of Jesus’ life had to be omitted from the Bible. Unfortunately for the early editors, one particularly troubling earthly theme kept recurring in the gospels. Mary Magdalene.’ He paused. ‘More specifically, her marriage to Jesus Christ.’

‘I beg your pardon?’ Sophie’s eyes moved to Langdon and back to Teabing.

‘It’s a matter of historical record, and Da Vinci was certainly aware of that fact. The *Last Supper* practically shouts at the viewer that Jesus and Magdalene were a pair. ... Notice that Jesus and Magdalene are clothed in mirror images of one another.’

Sophie was mesmerised. Sure enough, their clothes were inverse colours. Jesus wore a red robe and blue cloak; Mary Magdalene wore a blue robe and a red cloak. *Yin and yang*.

‘Venturing into the more bizarre, note that Jesus and His bride appear to be joined at the hip and are leaning away from one another as if to create this clearly delineated negative space between them.’

Even before Teabing traced the contour for her, Sophie saw it – the indisputable shape at the focal point of the painting. It was the same symbol Langdon had drawn earlier for the Grail, the chalice and the female womb.

‘Finally, if you view Jesus and Magdalene as compositional elements rather than as people, you will see another obvious shape leap out at you.’ He paused. ‘A letter of the alphabet.’

Sophie saw it at once. To say the letter leapt out at her was an understatement. The letter was suddenly all Sophie could see. Glaring in the centre of the painting was the unquestionable outline of an enormous, flawlessly formed letter M.

‘A bit too perfect for coincidence, wouldn’t you say.’ Teabing asked.

Sophie was amazed. ‘Why is it there?’

Teabing shrugged. ‘Conspiracy theorists will tell you it stands for Matrimonio or Mary Magdalene. To be honest, no one is certain. The only certainty is that the hidden M is no mistake. Countless Grail-related works contain the hidden letter M – whether as a watermark, underpaintings or compositional allusions...

Sophie weighed the information. 'I'll admit, the hidden M's are intriguing, although I assume no one is claiming they are proof of Jesus' marriage to Magdalene.

... According to these unaltered gospels it was not Peter to whom Christ gave directions with which to establish the Christian Church. It was Mary Magdalene.'

'You're saying the Christian Church was to be carried on by a woman?'

'That was the plan. Jesus was the original feminist. He intended for the future of His Church to be in the hands of Mary Magdalene.'

'And Peter had a problem with that,' Langdon said, pointing to *The Last Supper*. 'that's Peter there. You can see that Da Vinci was well aware of how Peter felt about Mary Magdalene.' In the painting, Peter was leaning menacingly toward Mary Magdalene and slicing his blade-like hand across her neck. 'And here, too,' Langdon said, pointing now to the crowd of disciples near Peter. 'A bit ominous, no?'

Sophie squinted and saw a hand emerging from the crowd of disciples. 'Is that hand wielding a dagger?'

'Yes. Stranger still, if you count the arms, you'll see that this hand belongs to ... no one at all. It's disembodied. Anonymous.'

Sophie was starting to feel overwhelmed. 'I'm sorry, I still don't understand how all of this makes Mary Magdalene the Holy Grail.'

... Mary Magdalene was of royal descent.... 'the legend of the Holy Grail is a legend about royal blood. When Grail legend speaks of "the chalice that held the blood of Christ" ... it speaks in fact of Mary Magdalene – the female womb that carried Jesus' royal bloodline.'

'... but how could Christ have a bloodline unless...'

'Unless they had a child.'

...'Not only was Jesus Christ married but He was a father. My dear, Mary Magdalene was the Holy Vessel. She was the chalice that bore the royal bloodline of Jesus Christ.'

Dan Brown is an American novelist who has published a number of books – several of them thrillers with a conspiracy theory theme.

Saunders article:

<http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2011/oct/21/leonardo-da-vinci-painter-milan>

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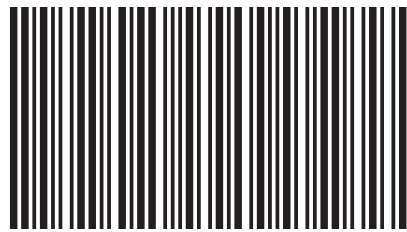
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